

6. Revelation: Pergamos – The Compromising Church

Ps. Johnny Lesnik

Preached: 21st January 2024 @ Logan Christian Fellowship

Text:
Revelation 2:12--17

Introduction:

- We are studying the messages that Jesus wrote to the seven churches in the Book of Revelation. These were small churches in Asia Minor and they represent all the churches of all the ages. The section we are in right now is in the present tense and is talking about people just like us, churches just like churches today. Today we'll study the third letter our Lord wrote to the church at Pergamos in *Revelation 2:12-17*. Let's read...

● I. THE PLACE OF THE CHURCH

- Firstly, let's consider the place of the church at Pergamos – its also called by Pergamon, or Pergamum. If someone were to ask you where you are from, you'd probably say, "Waterford West," or "Marsden", or you might say, "Logan City" – and most would know where that is in QLD. We all know that Logan City is a beautiful place. But what if somebody asked you, "Where are you from?" or "Where do you live?" and you said, "Oh, I live where Satan's throne is" or "I live where Satan lives." ☺ They'd say, "What in the world did you just say?" It's interesting that Jesus identifies Pergamos as the place where Satan has his throne. But isn't Satan everywhere? No, he is not! Only God is omnipresent and for you to believe Satan exists everywhere is to ascribe to him an attribute belonging to God alone. Satan is a fallen angel. His influence and his demonic organization stretches all across this planet but he can only be in one place at one time. Where he is we don't know but, Jesus knows and Jesus knew Satan had his throne in this city of Pergamos (located in today's Turkey). So what do we know about this city?

- **1. Great learning: A great library:** Pergamos was basically known for two things: It had a great library and it had a great religious system. So, in the ancient world there were two cities with great libraries. First and most significant was the great library at Alexandria in northern Egypt. It had over 300,000 volumes in the form of scrolls. The greatest centre of intellectual learning and academic study in the ancient world was in Alexandria, Egypt. When the Muslims overran Alexandria in the 7th century, they burned every volume in the library. The second greatest library in the ancient world was in Pergamos with over 200,000 volumes in their library. Pergamos was a centre of learning and is where people came to study.

- But can I remind you that I.Q. has nothing to do with one's spiritual commitment! The Bible says in fact *"in the last days men will be ever learning,"* will be more and more educated, *"but never able to come to the knowledge of the truth"* (2 Tim. 3:7). It is possible for you to learn so many facts you can be accurate and still not know the truth that comes from Jesus Christ. You can go to university campuses today and find people who are intellectually advanced who do love Jesus and love God's word, but let's face it; usually on the average the higher the academic standing of people, the less time they have for the Bible and God's word. That's not always true, but it's true to a great extent. And it was in this city of great learning was where Satan kept his throne. Very interesting.

- **2. Great religion: Asclepius cult:** And this city was a religious centre – there were all kinds of false religions and beliefs there... much like Logan City where there are over 350K people and more than 230 different cultures! This is where there was great religion. The Romans were pantheistic—they believed god was everywhere in anything and everything or that anything could be a god. They were also polytheistic—they believed there were many gods. Jesus? Sure one more god won't hurt! The more the merrier. But when the Christians came along and said, *"No there is only one God and his Son. Jesus is the only way to heaven"*, that's when they were persecuted. Pergamos was a very religious city.

● Have you ever seen the symbol for the medical profession or a pharmacy? It's a staff with either one or two snakes intertwined to the top. It is the symbol of the Australian Medical Association. That symbol came from Pergamos and is called the rod of Asclepius – it's not from Moses lifting the serpent up in the wilderness as many people suppose – but it's from this pagan god Asclepius, the god of healing. People came from all over the Roman Empire to Pergamos to be healed. It was much like Lourdes in France today where thousands of people go to for miraculous healings. I know you shudder to even think about this, but they used snakes as part of their medical treatment. People would enter the temple of Asclepius, lie on the floor in darkness, and non-poisonous snakes crawled all over them. They believed if these non-poisonous snakes writhed all over you at night you would be healed. *I'd just as soon be sick!* 😊 But the worship of Asclepius made Pergamos a great religious centre, and as Jesus said, ***"Satan's throne is there."***

● Why did Jesus say Satan has a throne? In the scriptures Satan is often given a title of authority. He is called, ***"The Prince of the Power of the Air"*** (Eph. 2:2). The word, prince, is a term of royalty, of control and authority. In the Old Testament he is seen even is identified as ***the "Prince of Persia"*** (Dan. 10:13). That's why in the New Testament when it says ***"we are not wrestling against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, against spiritual wickedness in high places and the rulers of darkness of this world"*** (Eph. 6:12) - God has temporarily given Satan limited authority in this world. Folks, Satan is not in Hell shovelling coals into some big furnace. He doesn't wear red long johns, and have pointed ears, horns, and a pointed tail. The Bible says, ***"He has disguised himself as an angel of light"*** (2 Cor. 11:14). We probably wouldn't recognize him. The Bible says, ***"He is like a roaring lion, roaming about, seeking whom he may devour"*** (1 Pet. 5:8) and Jesus writes to these people at Pergamos and he says, ***"You folks have it really tough because you are where Satan's throne is"*** – and it seems that Satan was going to attack the whole Church of Asia Minor from this place.

● One very interesting book for you to read is called, ***'The Two Babylons'***, by Alexander Hislop who details how the Pagan mystery cults at Babylon transferred to Pergamos after the death of Belshazzar, the Babylonian Emperor. So it moved from Babylon, moved to Pergamos, and incidentally Hislop traces how it moved from Pergamos eventually to Rome - and many of the trends we find in the Roman Catholic Church are owed to paganism.

● **II. THE PRAISE FOR THE CHURCH**

● **1. They held fast to the name of Jesus:** Secondly, Jesus gives them some praise for things they are getting right and encourages them to continue to be faithful. He says, ***"My name is held true."*** In ***verse 13 He says, "I know where you live, where Satan has his throne, and yet you hold fast to my name."*** The name of Jesus. You see, there were many gods in that culture... Apollo, Aphrodite, Jupiter, etc. One of their most popular gods was a god who is still worshiped today in Australia—Bacchus, the god of wine, drunkenness, and partying. Today, when someone says, "Let's party! Party hard!"... that's the god, Bacchus. ● Drunkenness and debauchery aren't anything new. They worshiped Bacchus back then. They just gave him a name and we don't but, he still exists today and every Friday and Saturday night many people go to his temple called 'clubs' and kneel at his altar. But Jesus said, ***"In the midst of all of these other names"*** Apollo, Jupiter, Bacchus, Aphrodite, Diana, Zeus, Mercury... ***"you are holding fast to My name!"***

Isn't it wonderful that we as Christians have the opportunity to lift up the name of Jesus? How many times this week have you lifted up the name of Jesus? People will often talk about their church, or their church band, or event... but that's not important – are you talking about the Lord Jesus? Are you holding up the name of Jesus? He said to these people, ***"I commend you for holding up my name in a pagan environment."*** There are people out there who need to hear the name of Jesus.

- **2. They did not deny their faith in Jesus:** As I mentioned last week, once a year every resident of the Roman Empire was required to burn incense to Caesar and to say, “Caesar is Lord.” Most people just did it without any problem because just as they believed in all the other gods, sure, Caesar can be one more of the many gods but the Christians said, “No, we will not deny our Lord Jesus.” He said, “I commend you for that because you are not denying the faith that has been given to you.”

Not denying the faith means more than just keeping your Christian testimony intact. It specifically means being faithful to Christ even if it were to cost you your life. He says to this church, “You are willing to die for me.” Look in the last part of **verse 13. “Antipas, my faithful witness, has been put to death in your city.”** I encourage every one of you to get a book entitled, Fox’s Book of Martyrs, because it gives a description of many of the martyrs who died for their faith in the early church. The emperor Nero used to dip Christians in tar and tie them to the trees in his gardens and set them afire to illuminate his way as he rode through the gardens. Roman soldiers would often put young Christians in leather bags and then add scorpions and poisonous snakes; tie the tops of the bags and toss them into the river or the sea. It was an agonizing death. The whole time they were demanding those people to renounce their faith in Jesus. Antipas was the pastor of the small church of Pergamos, ordained by Apostle John. We don’t know too much about him except that the historical account tells us that he was roasted alive in a bronze bull in 92AD. And Jesus calls Antipas, “*My faithful martyr*” and that word means witness – the Lord gives Antipas His own name from **1:5 – faithful witness.**

- I said this last week and I’ll say it again.... Have you thanked God for the freedom you have to worship Jesus in Australia? At least to this point we do. No one is going to arrest you for coming here on Sunday mornings or Wednesday nights. You cannot understand what a great privilege it is unless you understand the terrible persecution the early Christians faced. Think about this: What would happen today if religious extremists broke through those front doors of this building and rushed in here with grenades and sub-machine-guns and they declared holy war–against us “infidels” and they lined all of us up against one wall of this room and pointed their machine-guns at us and they said, “*Everyone who will renounce the name of Jesus may leave and everyone else will be shot!*” What would you do? Let’s all collectively thank God and trust Him that’s not going to happen. But I challenge you that if you said in your heart you would stand there and die for Jesus, then why is it that you won’t live for him on Monday and Tuesday and lift up his name? You’d be willing to die but are you willing to live?

● **III. THE PROBLEMS IN THE CHURCH**

1. Balaam–Worldliness: Look at verse 14 he says, “*Nevertheless, I have a few things against you*” then He names two problems in the church. “*You have people there who hold to the teaching of the doctrine of Balaam.*” That can be summarized in the word - good old fashioned “worldliness.” What is worldliness? It’s simply showing the characteristics of this world in the church. It is the mistake and the problem Balaam committed in the Old Testament in Numbers 22.

The children of Israel were coming out of Egypt on their way to the Promised Land and there was a king in Moab named Balak. And Balak had heard this Israeli army had been wiping out everybody they had encountered so, Balak said, “*I need a little, extra help.*” He heard there was a prophet; he wasn’t a Jewish prophet, he was a Gentile prophet but, he knew God and God talked to him and he talked to God. So, Balak said, “*Balaam, come to Moab, because I want you to pronounce a curse upon this Israeli army because if you don’t, they are going to destroy us.*” Balaam said, “*What’s it worth to you?*” Balak said, “*You name the price.*” Balaam asked God “*Should I go and do this?*”

God said, *“No, these are my people. Don’t you dare curse them!”* but Balaam started thinking about all that money. He started thinking about how his bank account would swell beyond what he would ever need, how he would be financially secure from now on—wealthy, rich – and so he compromised. He tried to obey God in one sense and he tried to obey Balak in the other sense because there was all that money to make... and so he stood with one foot in the world and one foot trying to do God’s work! Funny thing was, that he went to Moab and instead of cursing the Israeli army, for some strange reason he prayed for them and blessed them... because God took it upon himself to speak through Balaam’s mouth a blessing. Who says that God can’t make you do something?

Now Balak wasn’t happy about this, because Balaam was uncontrollably blessing Israel instead of cursing them.... But Balaam still wanted to get that money from Balak. So the devil used Balaam to give the king a plan to morally corrupt Israel. He told Balak that if he were to send in beautiful Moabite women amongst the men of Israel, then they would seduce them into compromising immorality and idol worship, and that would become their weakness. You see, if the devil can’t get at you as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour, he’ll then come as a sly and subtle serpent. That’s what happened in Numbers and it’s what Jesus is speaking about in this church in Pergamos. It is effectively the slow breaking down of their holy separation unto God. Read Numbers 25 to see just how much damage Balaam’s teaching did to Israel. Is the devil doing this in your life by any chance?

Let’s come back to Pergamos... there was so much paganism and idolatry there, there was a lot of meat that was offered to idols, so much that it had to go to the markets and be sold for cheap. And if you went to someone’s house for dinner, or a public festival, chances were that you would be eating meat that had been offered to an idol. And the Bible teaches that Christian’s should not eat meat that had been offered to idols. And there were also these temples there were there were females who men could fornicate with, and this was seen as an act of worship there. Can you begin to see how easy it was for Christians to get mixed up with those practices – this is physical and spiritual unfaithfulness toward God.

● Maybe you think that's a bit strong, just over eating a piece of meat. The fact of the matter is, in **James 4:4** we read: ***You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.*** This was a problem and Paul in the Corinthians letter says that he wanted to offer the Corinthian church as a chaste virgin, betrothed and engaged to the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 11:2), and if he was going to do that, they had to be pure. Later in the book of Revelation we encounter a religious system that is described as a defiled harlot - but there's also the pure spotless bride of Christ, that's what we're meant to be!

In **Acts chapter 15:29** it is recorded that at the Council of Jerusalem the Apostles and the church there ruled that, among several other things, Gentile believers were not to eat meat offered to idols, and were not to commit fornication - but teachers were coming into the church at Pergamos and saying: *‘Ah, you don’t need to worry about that, that’s old hat now. It doesn’t do any harm! You don’t need to be exclusive in your separation from the world’.* Do you know what they were doing? They were challenging the teaching of the Apostles - that's what we're having today in the church of Jesus Christ. People are challenging the principles of New Testament apostolic doctrine, they're watering it down in whatever way you like. It’s also known today as “The Emerging Church”. They are saying, *“That’s old fashioned now... we’ve got to find new ways to connect with our generation.”*

Listen, this was a big problem in the 4th century – remember Emperor Constantine’s professed conversion? He made the whole Roman empire Christian, supposedly. Suddenly, it was popular to be a Christian... all you had to do was be baptised and then you were given a white robe and some money and that was incentive for anyone to get ‘saved’. You see what was happening? The church was in the world but now the world had come into the church, and universally this has always been a problem!

● Beware of any kind of teaching that says that we must be like the world in order to reach the world – did you hear what I said? Don't swallow this lie of the devil that we have to be like the world and appease their appetites and attitudes in order to get them saved! You know what is required? The only thing that has always been required in order for the lost to be saved... preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul says that *"it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes... for in it the righteousness of God is revealed"* (Rom. 1:16-17). The Bible says, *"Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him"* (1 Jn. 2:15). So this teaching of Balaam was being practiced by some of the people in this church... that they can live any way they please, and then they come to church on Sunday and sing all these hymns to God without a wounded conscience.

● Have you heard of Demosthenes? He was a well-known 4th century Greek orator from Athens. It is said that he couldn't talk very well so he filled his mouth with rocks and stood at the seashore and talked and learned to pronounce well and loud and he took the rocks out of his mouth one at a time until he became a great speaker. One writer said, *"That's how you make a preacher. You get a guy and you fill his mouth full of marbles and he speaks. Then one at a time he takes all the marbles out and when he loses all his marbles... he's a preacher."* ☺

Well, Demosthenes said, *"We have prostitutes for the sake of pleasure. We have mistresses for the sake of daily co-habitation and we have wives for the purpose of having children legitimately and of having a faithful guardian of our household affairs."* What he was basically teaching was the philosophy that it's ok to do what you like or to feel good, you can live as you please, as long as

● you're happy, right? But you know what God says? He says, *"Be holy even as I am holy"* (1 Pet. 1:16). Listen to **2 Cor. 6:14-18**.

● **2. Nicolaitans– Elite Religious Organization:** Their second problem was with the Nicolaitans, the way the church was organized. Most of you know a Greek word and don't even realize it. It is the word, "Nike." Do you wear Nike tennis shoes? Nike means *"to rule over, conquer."* This word, Nicolaitans, we've talked about before in the letter to the church at Ephesus and it means to *"chop, divide, conquer or rule over the people."* This was a problem that developed in the early church and still hasn't been corrected thoroughly. It is a division that developed within the church or organization. It was developed that there were two kinds of people in the church there were the clergy and there were the people... and the clergy had special rights and authorities and responsibilities the poor people didn't have. These people who had been ordained were the only ones who could forgive sin, collect indulgences or pray someone out of purgatory. They were the only ones who could do certain things and the poor people down here couldn't.

This idea of different kinds of Christians is not Biblical NT teaching. The Bible teaches the doctrine of the *"priesthood of the believers,"* meaning the foot of the cross is level. We are all equal in God's eyes. God has gifted each one of us differently with spiritual giftings in order to be servants in the church. It has nothing to do with any kind of ranking. This idea that there are some people who are more important and more spiritually privileged than others is the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. I want you to see what Jesus says about this doctrine.... To the church in Ephesus He says *"I hate the practices of the Nicolaitans"* (Rev 2:6) and to the church in Pergamos He says that if they don't repent of this teaching, then *"I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth!"* (Rev 2:16).

Now the only way these folk could repent was to kick these people out that were actively encouraging this. Look, we need to remember that the Lord is moving about in His churches as a High Priest Judge, and I think we forget about this. We're not used to this. Jesus is saying, *'Repent, change your mind about your sin, change your mind about your false doctrine, and change your mind about Me. You as a church, Pergamos, should not tolerate evil!'* So we need to use the two-edged sword to rightly divide doctrine, to sharpen our lives, to judge ourselves by the word of God – we are to judge everything and weigh everything by the balance of the Bible. Because if we don't, then the Lord is saying to Pergamos: *'Sort it out, or I'll come and sort it out myself'*. It's serious, isn't it?

IV. THE PROMISE TO THE CHURCH

● **1. Hidden manna – Daily feeding by God:** The final thing is the two promises Jesus makes to the church. *“To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna to eat.”* In the Old Testament, the children of Israel had nothing to eat in the wilderness so God miraculously showered down this foodstuff down every morning, and when they got up, it was there on the ground. I call it, “sanctified Frosted Flakes,” because the Bible describes it as small, round, flaky-like materials that were sweet to the taste. He said, “Go out and get all you want. But you have to eat it all that day.” Yesterday’s manna is no good. It always spoiled and rotted. So every day they had to go out and get more except on the Sabbath. On the Sabbath it was preserved all the way to the next day. There is a great lesson there. Every day you must spend time alone with the Lord. Yesterday’s devotion is already spoiled. And today you must seek God and be fed by Him. That’s the great teaching of manna.

The Bible also says there was a pot of manna put in the Ark of the Covenant and when the Babylonians overran the temple in Jerusalem, they stole the Ark of the Covenant and it has never been seen since. But Jewish tradition says the prophet Jeremiah went in and took that container of manna and hid it in Jerusalem—and it’s never been seen since. The Jews believe when the Messiah came the way he would prove he was the Messiah and would find the hidden manna and say, “Here it is!” but they’ve got it all wrong. That manna has been spoiled for a long time. Jesus is saying, *“Don’t miss it! If you will be faithful to me, I will feed you daily spiritually if you hunger and thirst after righteousness, I’ll see that you’re filled and you will be content.”*

2. White stone – Acceptance by God: This can mean a few things... in ancient times a white stone was proof of acquittal in a legal case, it meant that you were not guilty. It was also a symbol of victory in an athletic contest, and the stone would grant you entrance into the celebration afterwards. In either case, it seems to be a reward to the one that overcomes, and it expressed personal approval of them by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. They are even given a new name upon it! Acceptance with God, and a title of honour given by Him!

In conclusion, Pergamos was a compromising church but the Lord Jesus didn’t say, “Get out of that church and go to some other place”, did He? He says, *“Overcome where you are!”* I wonder if you would have overcome? Are you overcoming right now? Or are you too closely linked in with this world?

Here’s a simple illustration – it is very simple, but profound:

● *The moon was eclipsed one night, and it said to the sun, ‘Why don’t you shine on me the way you used to?’ The sun said, ‘I’m shining on you the way I always do, but the world has come between us’. Has the world come between you and God?*

May God bless His word to all our hearts today. LET’S PRAY....